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Boys Learning Languages



By Sarah Pavy

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She also has a Postgraduate Certificate in Bilingual / Immersion Education and Certificate IV in Workplace Assessment & Training, and has implemented programmes such as Immersion classes and vocational certificates, to motivate boys and to encourage real use of target language inside and outside the classroom.

Introduction

In recent years, teachers and schools in Australia have been struggling to keep boys engaged in language programs, especially beyond the years of compulsory language learning (Carr, 2003; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Jackson & Smith, 2000; Rowe, 2003). This is a concern not just for Australian educators, as very similar concerns have been raised in other English-speaking countries (Clark & Trafford, 1995; Jones & Jones, 2001; Williams, Burden, & Lanvers, 2002). As well as here in Australia, this issue is beginning to take on more significance in the UK and in New Zealand. Interestingly, these are countries with school systems of similar structure to our own (Greenaway, 1999).

The clearest indicator (i.e. the one easiest to measure) of the lack of interest that boys show in learning a language is the low numbers of boys enrolled in language programs in their final years of schooling (Pavy, 2005). Although all students learn at least one language in the early years of high school, once languages become optional, the retention rate of boys is very low in comparison to that of girls, and ranges from 20–40% of the total enrolment, depending on the language.

Figures from Victoria provide an example:

- In State secondary schools in Victoria in 2004, 1546 students completed Year 12 French. Only 23% of them were boys.
- In Independent secondary schools in Victoria in 2003, 339 students completed Year 12 German. Only 31% of them were boys.
- In State secondary schools in Victoria in 2004, 797 students completed Year 12 Indonesian. Only 29% of them were boys.
- In Independent secondary schools in Victoria in 2003, 741 students across Years 7–12 took Italian. Only 20% of them were boys.
- In Catholic secondary schools in Victoria in 2005, 5804 students were enrolled in a language other than English. Fewer than 10% were boys.

Although more difficult to quantify, a second indicator of boys' lack of interest in language learning is that of disengagement in the years prior to the subject's becoming optional. The under-

representation of boys in language classes at higher levels is a sign of what comes before, which is perhaps the underlying issue and the one that needs to be considered. Although harder to measure, the evidence comes from teachers and from boys themselves — boys at the lower secondary levels are not motivated to learn languages. They are disruptive in class, and they often either do not enjoy the activities and materials employed, or they do not see the point of what they are doing. Teachers feel that boys are not focused and do not put enough effort into their work. They certainly do not always approach their language learning with the enthusiasm, excitement, and motivation that we, as language teachers, would like to see.

There is a real need to look in greater depth at what goes on inside the minds of boys in Australian schools as well as what goes on in language classrooms across the country. It is not simply the under-representation of boys in language programs that is of increasing concern; there is also the growing trend of underachievement by boys in this area. Educational research in the UK reflects similar issues to those in the Australian school context, showing that when looking at the achievement of boys and girls in different subjects, 'the disparity in performance between the sexes in modern languages is particularly marked' (Clark & Trafford,





1995, p. 323). The negative feelings associated with underachievement must certainly lead to fewer boys in language classrooms, but this is a cycle that does not stop here. Fewer boys learning languages and lower levels of achievement by them sends out a strong message to others moving up through the school system, as well as in the outside community, and thus the cycle continues and becomes more vicious.

Although this article focuses on boys, I am sure that much of what I have to say applies equally to girls. Nevertheless, the focus of this article is on what boys feel about school and about language learning and how we might be able to tune in to what they are telling us in order to reach the boys in our classes and keep them there.

What is happening in language classrooms?

In order to address the issue of the under-representation and underachievement of boys in language classrooms across the country, we need to ask ourselves two questions:

- Why are boys not engaged?
- Why does this lack of engagement affect language programs most of all?

We need to begin with this second question, as it is important to consider the ways in which language learning differs from learning in most other subjects at secondary level. According to UK research carried out by Jones and Jones (2001, p. 46), 'boys see... (languages) as different from other curriculum subjects', one of the major distinctions being 'the central position of the teacher in language classrooms'. Students in my own research (Pavy, 2005) claim that learning a language is not like learning other subjects, where they can 'help themselves'

more. In many subjects, if students don't understand something, they feel confident that they can do some extra reading, carry out some research on the Internet at home, or ask their parents for help. Learning a language, they feel, is quite different in that they don't have this same safety net (Pavy, 2005).

Language learning is enormously teacher-centred and students rely almost entirely upon their teachers to enable them to gain access to, understand, and use the target language. Jones and Jones (2001) looked at the way in which this kind of understanding impacts on boys' learning. One of their key findings was that 'because (language) pedagogy... is so teacher-centred, boys who are underperforming tend to see the teacher as responsible for the difficulties that they have in their learning' (Jones & Jones, 2001, p. 47).

According to Carr (2003, p. 5), when the boys in her study were asked to describe types of teaching and learning that they would prefer, their responses formed 'a list of characteristics which more or less constituted a definition of current 'best practice teaching method', viz. 'learner-centred, task-based, communicatively-oriented, contextualised learning'. The descriptions the boys gave of their language classes, however, drew a picture of 'a very traditional, grammar-translation, text-based approach to teaching'. What this indicates about what is happening in language classrooms around Australia is of some concern. Just what is it that we are doing that doesn't inspire young men to continue with their language learning once it is no longer compulsory? Clark and Trafford state that

...both boys and girls expressed frustration about the repetitive nature of their learning experience. Certain topics had obviously been covered several times in the course of five years' study and consequently lost any appeal they might have had. (1995, p. 320)

Jones and Jones (2001, p. 23) discovered that students, when exposed to a topic for a second time, rather than seeing this as developing the topic in greater depth, 'were critical that these re-emerged' and felt that 'they had already 'done' them, so did not want to pay attention'.

According to the boys in Carr's research (Carr, 2002, p. 9) 'boys, in their own opinion, are less prepared to be bored than girls'. In synthesising these findings we can thus infer that while students of both sexes lose interest when material is repetitive, the impact is greater on boys, who are less tolerant of boredom than girls. This is reinforced by Williams et al. (2002, p. 515), whose research tells us that 'both boys and girls explained that girls were more inclined to put effort into work that appeared tedious while boys needed to find enjoyment in it'. It seems that, in order for boys to actually 'work', they require their tasks to be enjoyable and interesting, while girls will put up with a degree of tedium. Jones and Jones' (2001) research mirrors this:

Most boys claim that they engage differently with the learning environment in (languages) than girls... boys

boys learning languages – sarah pavy

confirm that they are less likely than girls to adopt and maintain the sound study skills, good presentation, and thorough learning strategies demanded of them in (languages). They are less inclined to concentrate, memorise, listen to others, follow instructions, and work constructively with peers and are more reliant on the teacher to motivate them to communicate and interact in the target language. (2001, p. 20)

Linked to the ideas of the differences in motivation and responses to boredom between boys and girls is that of classroom behaviour. According to Gurian (2001, p. 58), 'boys goof off more' than girls and tend to be 'loud..., aggressive, and competitive in a classroom', while Rowe (2003, p. 12) notes that girls 'demonstrate more attentive behaviours in the classroom'. Clark and Trafford (1995, p. 319) also refer to this phenomenon of a male tendency to play up in a classroom setting, commenting that 'both pupils and teachers noted that boys were more likely to 'mess about' in class than girls'. Jones and Jones (2001) are of the belief that language classrooms are more vulnerable to this type of behaviour than other subjects:

Where boys fall behind in... (languages) and feel lost or disoriented, 'messaging about' is a way of responding. (2001, p. 47)

Carr (2003, p. 4) attempts to explain why boys like to 'muck around', which makes it difficult to learn. She believes that this behaviour gives boys a sense of belonging to the group, and that part of being a boy appears to be 'mucking up'. She comments that 'because of the perception that languages are 'girls' business', language classrooms appear to be a prime site for mucking up'. Whether the reasons behind this behaviour are linked to boys' feeling out of control and not understanding, or to their need to feel part of a group, or a combination of both, what cannot be questioned is that boys exhibit this type of behaviour far more often than girls and that it is frequently seen in a language classroom setting.

Boys involved in research into this area immediately identify the teacher's role as integral to their success (Jones & Jones, 2001; Slade & Trent, 2000). According to Jones & Jones (2001, p. 46):

The teacher's capacity for making and maintaining good working relationships as well as his or her pedagogic expertise is an important factor in boys' response to the subject and their willingness to work. Having a teacher whom boys judge to be 'good' is an important dimension of engagement.

What boys need in a teacher

Steve Biddulph, writer of several books on raising boys, claims that 'boys learn teachers, not subjects' (Biddulph, 2003). This sentiment has been echoed, in various forms, by researchers in the field of boys' education around the country (Browne & Fletcher, 1995; Hartman 1999; Hawkes, 2001; Rowe, 2003). Out of this research have emerged statements on qualities — identified by boys themselves — as being the common and essential ingredients in the recipe for 'good teachers'. These may match what girls feel

make 'good teachers', but are specifically drawn from work with boys in Australia.

According to boys, and as outlined by Rowe (2003), good teachers meet the '5Fs' criteria, i.e. they are

- Firm
- Friendly
- Fun
- Focused
- Fair.

Firmness

Firmness signifies the skill of relaxed control. Teachers need to strike a balance between being disciplined and remaining relaxed. The classroom needs to be controlled so that it is a safe place where students can take risks with language, while teachers who are able to relax and be themselves will be more successful in making a connection with students.

Friendliness

Boys use a range of adjectives and expressions to describe a friendly teacher: they are approachable, not intimidating, easy to talk to, encouraging, and helpful. Boys fear judgement from both their teachers and their peers. They don't want to appear foolish in front of their classmates and need to be able to ask questions of teachers without fear of ridicule. Their questions need to be taken seriously without fear of reproach or teacher frustration.

A sense of humour

A sense of fun is probably the essential ingredient and the way to a boy's heart. Humour is an incredibly powerful way to reach boys — it is extremely important to them that they can make jokes and enjoy a laugh with their teachers.

A focus

Boys want to learn and they want a focused teacher. In their ideal lesson boys learn a lot of new things, improve their skills, and complete tasks. For boys, a good teacher is one who wants to teach them as much as possible and one who is focused on their learning. Boys don't respect a teacher who allows them not to do work, and students need to respect the teacher in order to learn from them.

Fairness

It is very important to boys that teachers are consistent and fair, that their rules are clearly outlined and do not change according to the student, the teacher's mood, the class, the day. Boys don't want to learn from teachers who don't give them a fair go. Fair teachers are not dismissive of boys' ideas or their answers in class; they encourage boys to have a go at things even if they think they may find them hard, and they believe in them as much as they believe in any other student.

Teacher effect

Research shows that teachers influence students far more than any other variable, e.g. the school itself, class size, gender groupings, ability, and so on. The 'school effect', i.e. the extent to which the school as a whole impacts on a student's performance, counts for only 5.5% of 'total effect', whereas the



boys learning languages – sarah pavy

'teacher effect' on students' learning counts for 59% (Rowe, 2003). This means that while the actual school environment has a small influence on the achievement of a student, it is individual teachers who have by far the greatest effect.

Boys need their teachers — without teacher input, patience, and encouragement they feel lost and unable to make progress. When it comes to language learning, boys have a sense that, unlike in other subjects, they can't help themselves. More than in any other subject, language teachers are the key to a boy's learning, motivation, and success. In other subjects, boys feel that they can get by — they can get help at home, use the internet, or do some reading. When learning a language, boys often feel as though they are 'drowning', that things are 'out of their control', and that they don't understand anything. Boys may seem confident, but inside they are fragile. In a language classroom they are not in control, and every time they offer something to the class they are allowing themselves to be vulnerable. For many boys, this is perhaps a challenge they are willing to confront only if their teacher believes in them and rewards their risk-taking. Without such support, language learning may be not only demotivating, but also potentially destructive to their self-esteem.

For this reason, it is of the utmost importance that language teachers connect with boys in their classrooms. Hawkes (2001, p. 71) says,

...a boy's attitude to school, to learning, and to himself will be coloured by the qualities of his teacher. For this reason, a teacher must do more than grind through course content. They must build relationships and enter the world of the boy.

Throughout this research project I worked closely with the boys I teach in order to gain an insight into what it is that makes a difference to a boy's experience of a language classroom. Although the following ideas might well apply to girls and their learning, these guidelines are based on what the boys participating in my research have shared with me and thus reflect what boys in particular are saying about their experiences.

A language teacher who engages with boys is one who **CARES**, i.e. they are

- Connected with the students
- Actively involved in their learning
- Relaxed and have a sense of fun
- Enthusiastic about the target language and about their own teaching, and they also
- Strike a balance between fun and discipline (Pavy, 2005):

Being connected

Teachers who engage with boys connect with their students by showing that they care about them as individuals and that they are interested in their lives.

Being actively involved

Teachers who engage with boys are actively involved in their students' learning — they are 'interactive'. Teachers who move around the room, helping

individuals, giving feedback, following up on lost worksheets, and reminding students when they may have forgotten something, show that they are an active participant in the learning process.

Being relaxed

Teachers who engage with boys are relaxed. Boys see this as an essential element in a learning situation that they enjoy. Teachers need to be able to joke and laugh with boys — humour is an excellent way to engage boys in their learning.

Being enthusiastic

Teachers who engage with boys are enthusiastic. The boys involved in my research project were very keen on teachers who are enthusiastic about the subject they teach and about their own teaching. Boys rely on their teachers to help them to see what is exciting about the language they are learning and about the process of learning it. Enthusiasm is contagious, and a teacher who is excited about languages, about learning, and about boys will transfer that energy and passion to them.

Striking a balance

Teachers who engage with boys are able to strike a balance between fun and discipline. Boys are very clear about their need for teachers to understand and define the behavioural boundaries in the classroom. In the feedback that I received during my project the word 'fun' featured in almost every boy's list of essential ingredients for learning a language. But they also constantly came back to the idea of maintaining a balance between having fun and being controlled. Boys need such boundaries to be clearly and consistently demonstrated, and they have less respect for teachers who do not maintain that balance. This skill of 'relaxed control' on the part of the teacher ensures a safe and enjoyable learning environment for them.

Teachers who practise the five areas of **CARES** as outlined above automatically meet the **5Fs** suggested by the boys themselves.

Meaningful learning

Learning a language appears to hold little meaning for many boys. They find it difficult to make the connection between the language learned in a classroom and its use in real and meaningful situations. Jones and Jones (2001, p. 47) found that language learning is, 'for some boys, an 'unreal' experience'. Carr's research (2003, p. 5) reflects the same response from boys. She refers to a 'perceived lack of 'reality' and authenticity of experience' and talks about 'what boys described as the artificial and 'unreal' tasks often associated with (second language) learning'.

The boys involved in my research said they needed to be offered

- **content that is relevant to their lives and interests:** they want to know whether the language they are learning is real and meaningful, whether it is useful, and whether they will actually use it
- **purposeful activities every lesson:** they want to know where their learning is leading, why they are learning what they are, and whether they need to learn it



boys learning languages – sarah pavy

- **progress indicators:** they want to know whether they have learnt something new each lesson, whether their skills are improving, and whether they are getting closer to achieving their goals (Pavy, 2005).

These findings reflect other research in the field of boys' education, and not just in language learning. Some features of a language lesson that can help boys to see these three aspects of 'best practice' are outlined below.

Relevance

For materials to be relevant to boys, there is no need for teachers to focus on topics that are traditionally seen as being of more interest to boys, e.g. sport or cars. It is more important to think about developing language skills that boys see as useful in their lives. This means being able to express ideas that are important to them and using language in everyday situations in which they can imagine themselves; the language they learn must be of some benefit to them and their lives in the future. Boys do not regard as meaningful learning words out of context that enable them to say things they have been able to say in English since the age of five. They need to see language in a context and to work with linguistic material to which they can relate and in which they are interested.

Purpose

An outline on the board of what is planned for the lesson enables students to see a purpose for what they are doing and to work towards the same goals as the teacher. Teachers can help boys to make links to language learnt previously in other topic areas. These connections, sometimes not made by boys themselves without teacher guidance, help them to see the 'big picture' of their language learning. Explaining to them how and what they are learning in a particular lesson will give them a foundation for the learning ahead and enable them to communicate ideas in other contexts, as well as make their learning more purposeful. Boys like talking, moving, touching, using, experiencing, doing. Involving their bodies in their learning appeals not only to boys' kinesthetic intelligence, but also to their need for real, purposeful learning. Boys are focused when they can see the point of what they are doing and are physically involved in their task. When the goal is to do something with the language, the language makes sense to them and becomes more meaningful.

Progress

Teachers can help boys to see the progress they have made by end-of-lesson discussion of what has been learned, using checklists of learning, and continuing to make links to previously learned language, so that boys have a sense of what they have achieved over a long period of time. Activities that allow boys to actually use the language in simulated authentic situations are essential. If boys are not able to express themselves orally in the language, they will feel that they are not making progress and that there is no point to their learning. Despite a greater focus on written work at the higher levels of schooling, boys need to be given the opportunity to speak and use the language so that they feel a sense of achievement and success. For them, communication means talking. If they are unable to

talk, many of them do not see themselves as successful language learners.

Organised lessons

Through in-depth discussion with boys during this research project and my experience working with them over time, boys have indicated that they do enjoy learning and that they learn best when language lessons

- are well planned and paced
- engage their attention and keep them alert
- are collaborative and competitive
- keep them energetic and engaged
- are rounded off rewarding. (Pavy, 2005)

These elements are elaborated below.

Planning and pacing

Boys like to know what is planned for each lesson and the direction in which the lesson is heading. This information enables them to pace themselves, conserving their energy during low-demand tasks and putting in more effort during other more difficult tasks.

Engagement and alertness

The first few minutes of the lesson are crucial in engaging boys. It is important to get their attention with something interesting and draw them in. A boy who loses interest during these first few minutes will be extremely difficult to reach. It is important to ensure that instructions are given in small, simple 'chunks' and that such instructions are given both orally and in writing.

Collaboration and competition

Working with their peers is of enormous importance to boys. They need to be able to run ideas by each other, discuss possibilities, and support each other in their learning. Working with their peers provides boys with an opportunity to articulate their thoughts before committing them to paper. This gives them more confidence and aids them in both their spoken and their written work, as they have been able to formulate their answers aloud first and develop some sense of structure to their responses. Often collaboration can be in the form of whole-class activities. The teacher can model language, e.g. show examples of past student work or have the class complete a task as a group before setting it to be done by students individually, as well as discuss structures before asking boys to begin tasks. Competing adds a fun element to lessons for boys and provides a clear, immediate goal. Competition was identified by the boys in my research as a motivating factor in their language learning, whether as individuals competing against their own past performance, against each other, or against other groups in the class.

Energy and engagement

Variety is the key to keeping boys focused. It is important to keep activities 'short and sharp', i.e. they should be quick and well-controlled — for younger boys, activities should be changed ideally every ten to fifteen minutes. Each new activity gives



boys learning languages – sarah pavy

teachers the opportunity to re-engage boys so that they are again attentive and alert. Boys have a sense of moving forward and of making progress as they move from one activity to the next and experience a feeling of success with the completion of each task.

Rounding off and rewarding

It is important to help boys to see how everything in the lesson ties together, enabling them to gauge their own progress by bringing to their attention what they have learned during the lesson. The teacher can ask students to conclude the lesson with a brief summary, stating how far they believe they have come during the lesson. The end of a lesson requires control and structure — boys need to both hear and see what is expected of them. Thus the teacher should not only explain homework but also write it on the board, together with reminders regarding dates or deadlines. Praise and encouragement are vital elements in a language lesson and should be used as rewards along the way, but a final 'reward' or acknowledgment that they have worked well is very important to boys. This may take the form of a simple two-minute activity, discussion, or game, but any reward at the end of the lesson shows boys that they have worked through to the end of the planned learning and demonstrates their learning outcomes. This part of the lesson should not be forgotten if time is running short. The sense of satisfaction gained from this, plus the positive feeling left with the boys at the end of the lesson, are important factors in maintaining enthusiasm.

Some Classroom Strategies

The following strategies help boys to work in ways they prefer. Many such strategies are used commonly in classrooms and benefit both boys and girls in their language learning. Such strategies

- keep information simple and focused
- help students by modelling overall structures of writing and different ways of memorising information
- list easy ways to sum up what has been learned in a lesson (giving boys a sense of progress and purpose)
- offer students a visual means of learning and of monitoring their own behaviour
- offer small, achievable challenges to students (helping them to set short-term goals and to feel a sense of purpose and achievement).

What can you tell me...?

Ask students to tell you five things they know about an item of grammar, five new words they have learned today, etc., etc.

Build a story

Allow students to choose who will be the main character in the story (another student, a famous TV character, etc.). Encourage all students to contribute a sentence or two to the story — this becomes a class discussion of both content and the accuracy of structures. Focus on getting ideas down — nothing is too silly or incorrect. It is important to value each boy's contribution. Leave gaps as you write on the board so that, once the story is complete, you can

work around it (under the students' direction) to develop more complex sentences and rework the overall structure.

Compulsory question

Following the introduction of a new concept (e.g. a new tense), every student in the class must ask a question of the teacher (as a whole-class discussion). This ultimately forces students to ask even simple questions that they might have been afraid to ask in front of others as it is compulsory to ask something. Boys are keen to get involved because if they wait too long, all the questions will have been asked, leaving them with nothing ('Quick! Ask one now as the last few people to go will have to think of hard ones!'). This is a good way to ensure that students ask questions and are clear on the basic ideas underlying something new that has been learnt.

Grammar song

This could be rap or a chant or a song to a tune they know well. Encourage movement.

Noise thermometer

This is a very effective strategy that I read about years ago but was reminded of by a Dip Ed student who used it to get a difficult group to modify their behaviour. Draw a thermometer on the board with three sections. If the class gets noisy, shade the lowest section. If the noise increases, shade the section above. If the final section needs to be shaded, there is a consequence. This gives boys a visual image of exactly where the boundary is in terms of their behaviour — they can see if they are close to crossing that line.

Vocabulary pictures

This task is suitable for homework. For example, when teaching the past tense in French of a particular family of verbs, rather than give out a list or a picture to help students learn the verbs (a visual mnemonic), ask them to draw their own picture(s).

Setting a challenge

If you call a task 'a challenge' it will more likely grab boys' attention: 'See if you can do this one!', or 'Try this verb and see if you can guess the conjugation!', or 'Have a go at writing these harder numbers!' Some boys may want to skip ahead to face the challenge first.

Time limits

Set time limits for certain tasks, e.g. with a 'dictionary competition' give students three minutes to write down as many (words beginning with 'b' / feminine nouns / particular forms of the plural / etc.) as they can. Remind them of the time limit and keep the pace going: '20 seconds left. 15...'

Classification

Get students to categorise vocabulary learned, and let them choose the categories. For example, instead of providing a vocab list yourself, allow students to choose how they want to group vocabulary. For example, on the topic of food, they may choose food groups, or they may choose a more language-oriented grouping (noun gender), or they may choose foods that are good or bad for you, or foods they like or don't like. It helps students to memorise



boys learning languages – sarah pavy

vocabulary if they themselves can make associations between words.

Conclusion

Although good teaching clearly benefits both boys and girls, and much of what has been expressed by boys in this developing field of research may be similarly experienced by girls, the aim of this article is to look at what boys are telling researchers. I hope that by bringing into focus the boys we teach and what they may be thinking, discussion may ensue about strategies that, while enhancing the teaching of language generally, may help us also to reach those boys who challenge or resist our efforts to engage them in our classrooms.

To be motivated, boys need first and foremost an opportunity to connect with their teachers. This relationship forms the basis of their learning. It is important to boys that they can sense and see their own progress, and that each day they feel they have learned something new. Boys prefer to understand the purpose of what they are learning. This enables them to pace themselves and to work towards goals. They identify fun as an essential ingredient in the classroom but also feel that it is important to learn in a controlled environment. It is up to us as teachers to praise and encourage boys and to help them to feel confident about taking risks with their language learning.

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